

Guidelines for Talking with Children About Death

1. Do tell children immediately. Children should hear it from us.
2. Approach the discussion gently and lovingly in a voice that is warm, sympathetic and kind. HOW you say it is more important than WHAT you say.
3. Be authentic, be yourself; if you're sad let it show. We don't need to hide things or bottle up our feelings. Someone or something is gone and we feel badly because we care. Tears are okay, a natural thing (as long as we don't fall apart or get hysterical). It frightens children to see an adult out of control of their emotions. We can cry gently in our sadness and grief and be authentic. Death is hard to handle; it is a part of life.
4. Be realistic about grief; death hurts. "No man is an island; all deaths diminish us". It leaves a big hole in our lives when that person is gone. We are going to have our ups and downs. It's okay to feel sad and mad that they are gone and have left us.
5. Tell the cause of death.
6. When you are talking with children initially, pause from time to time to let them express their thoughts for you to observe and evaluate how they are taking it (from their non-verbal behavior). Watch for children's non-verbal response in the next few days or months.
7. Respect a child's individual response--each of us over time needs to find our own way. Let them vent the emotions of grief. It is okay to express tears, anger over the dead leaving us, the unfairness of it all. Guilt, denial, despair and protest are normal parts of the grief process.
8. Be prepared to repeat the explanation; death is a hard message to hear. Denial and numbness get in the way of hearing.
9. Let the child know that they will have questions and confusion about the death--we all have questions and you want him/her to come to you with feelings or things they want to talk about. We can talk about things that hurt.
10. Don't be afraid to say you don't know why. Death has many confusions or adults, too. It is part of the mystery of life, and we have to deal with it the best we know how.
11. Pull together as a family for support. "We are together and we will come through this time together."
12. Realize that grief is a process and it can take a long time. It has its ups and downs, good times and bad. We can expect it, but eventually we do "heal".
13. Do give children the feeling that life will continue despite the fact that the dead will be remembered, that they will live in our hearts, that eventually (while things will be changed and different), we will go on. Give reassurance and hope.
14. When talking with children about death, there are three things you can say: "When you die, life stops for the physical body"; "People who are dead don't come back to this life"; tell them where the body is or will be (buried or cremated).
15. Children need simple, direct, honest information. They need time to work through their grief. They need reassurance, understanding, comfort and support.
16. Do tell children about death in your own way--in keeping with your value system. There is no right way to approach the subject.